

The Sculpture of Arthur Carter

By Lance Esplund

The sculptures of Arthur Carter perform for us with dramatic aplomb. Like actors on a stage, these overarching characters take on slightly larger-than-life proportions. Seen collectively on Carter's Connecticut farm, the sculptures appear to have suddenly sprung forth from the earth, and to speak to one another across great distances. Some of these pieces communicate through song; some through dance; others through mathematical equations writ large, but each, in its own way, makes a grand entrance.

Trained as a classical musician, Carter leavens the dramatic with the melodic and the playful. He tempers the architectonic feel of these bronze and steel sculptures with an organic lyricism. Many of his works make mathematical or musical allusions and may even begin with, for example, a musical common chord, as in *Triad*; or the Pythagorean Theorem, as in *Mathematika*; or the Golden Mean, as in *Suffusion*, but these sculptures expand beyond mere illustrations of music or mathematics.

The somewhat violent looking and yet humorously appealing sculpture *Triad* resembles a tuning fork gone awry. The sculpture begins at its base as a single slightly curving, vertical plane. As the plane rises, seemingly under great stress, it slowly widens and separates, stretching into three planes or lines or notes, possibly into an inverted triad or an arpeggio. Near the top of the sculpture, the central plane or root, which has the energy of a shooting stalk, abruptly changes direction, angling downward, doubling itself

in a lower octave. Not only does this pointed root shift out of a vertical ascension, it butts in front of its neighbor, introducing a new frontal plane with the acute presence of a broken arm.

Morph, a singular waving S-curve, seductively shoots upward, narrows – as if it were hesitating or retracting, and then turns and expands in a metaphoric realm where antenna, breeze, and melodic line converge. *Morph's* simple, straightforward impact is heightened by the sculpture's own need for reductive purity. This sculpture bows with harplike grace, or arches and extends like a cat's tail one moment, and cracks like a whip the next. Probably the most sensual of Carter's works, *Morph* is both music and dance, snake and charmer. Like a single sustained note, this wavering sound hangs in the air, flitting between octaves with reticent ease.

Largo, as its title implies, is slow, broad, and abundant, but this huddling of rectangular volumes shifts and extends at different speeds. Like fingers to a hand, the individual forms are bounded though independent. There is a feeling of unease to the group, as these volumes seem to rock against each other, and to push to lower depths. A single form may lean both forward and backward simultaneously. The sculpture carries with it the mood of the plodding and the melancholic and, although the forms feel massive, tremolant, and grounded, en masse, there is an inevitable feeling of ascension.

In *Musika* Carter begins with the simple form of a cross. Immediately, as if the sculpture had entered this world off-center, we are set into a diagonal, corkscrewing

motion. Like its predecessor, *Morph*, *Musika* begins in transition. Moving around the sculpture we experience *Musika* in various states of change. The figure is infantile, sprouting in tension with the earth; though, in the next moment it seems to have just gently alighted. The sculpture strives equally towards opening and involution; towards dangerously arching and infinitely falling. *Musika* flutters between figure and plant, between letter form and swooping bird.

Carter's sculptures have the figure-ground, graphic punch of the front-page headline or the modern poster, and his background as a graphic designer and Publisher (he created and designed two newspapers: *The Litchfield County Times* and *The New York Observer*) has a great deal to do with his sensibility. Even the rather tender configuration *The Couple* (cat. no. 8) has a stark frontality. But the graphic and organic qualities of Carter's work come not only from his experience as a designer, his proximity to nature, and his love of the lyric mode, but also through the work of modern masters, with which he has chosen to surround himself.

Carter has been collecting the work of Arp, Kandinsky, Leger, and Braque, among others, for decades, and his farm and studio are near the estate of Alexander Calder, whose large outdoor works still can be seen while driving through the countryside. Calder's and Arp's playful inversions of mass and volume, their weightless, gravity-defying bodies seem to have had an impact on Carter's own work.

In *Elliptyk*, a leaning body of linking ovals that rise like bubbles or a juggler's objects, we sense Carter's desire for flight and his attraction to the constructivists' sculpted space. *Mathematika* is a Pythagorean puzzle made of three squares that are poised between precarious, cliff-hanging danger and extreme calm. The center, triangular opening takes on a geometric weight that begins to equal the squares that surround it. *Suffusion* is another planar and weightless volume. Comprised of intersecting, interlocking ovals, this sculpture is so suffused that it seems to have seeped itself inside out, and yet its circular rhythms continue to flow with spinning-top vigor.

Although Carter's sculptures resemble the work of a number of postwar minimalists (David Smith, Tony Smith, Donald Judd), Carter is a modernist at heart, and the writings of Kandinsky are continually indispensable to him; (*On the Spiritual in Art* is his "bedside primer"). Among the many watershed ideas in Kandinsky's writings is the notion of synesthesia (a poetic device in which one of the senses is evoked or stimulated by another i.e. a color that evokes a sound). Looking at Carter's work, I can't help but think that he is attempting to create in sculpture, as Kandinsky and Klee accomplished before him in paint, a kind of sculpted sound, a visual harmony of chords. In his own work Klee stressed the "disruption of the vertical" to evoke pathos and empathy. In so many of Carter's pieces he immediately shifts us off-center, out of the vertical, and sets us into motion. This first exhibition of Arthur Carter's work presents an artist at the threshold of his explorations. It will be exciting to see where he carries them in the future. We will greet them with open ears.